

Advocacy - Misunderstood, Misused and Essential

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Librarians, especially teacher librarians, care. We care about our institutions, our services, our patrons, about our society. It often frustrates us that those feelings are not always returned. Therefore, we turn to advocacy as an answer. The obvious solution, to us, is that "they" do not know or do not understand. We therefore charge off to rectify the situation-- knowing that we understand and we can explain...and all will be well. Wrong.

The first rule of advocacy is that you cannot do it for yourself or for your own institution. As Robert Martin explained in a WHCLIST Pre-conference presentation in April 2003, if we trace the word advocacy to its source, it means 'one who pleads the cause of another.' We often forget that we have a vested interest in our own success, and in the success of our institutions. We may forget that, but the policy makers, decision makers and resource allocators will not. We can explain, describe, answer questions artfully; but we cannot advocate. It is always best to find someone who understands the importance of what we do to speak for us....it *will* carry much more weight.

Second, know your history. Whatever your issue, it probably has a past in your community. (I use the word community to refer to a town, a school, a legislature, whatever the context, we all serve a community.) Know what that past is all about. Know where the past efforts failed and, if possible, know why. Research the details, rehearse the plausible scenarios, and think about the opinions that stopped your issue from being successful in the past. Never dismiss past obstacles. The past has a way of tripping up the present.

Third, study your context. Know the environment that surrounds your work. (It will be fruitless, and perhaps harmful, to ask for more funding in a time of serious retrenchment.) As a part of knowing your context, study the decision and policy makers--the 'resource allocators' as Robert Martin terms them. Basically, know as much as you can about the people who make the critical decisions about your work. Above all be aware that in our society, those individuals define the social good. Again as Robert Martin stated, "Politics serves as the final arbiter of public value." (p. 7) However we might struggle to educate or explain to those elected to public service, they, not we, are the final decision makers. What they care about, what reality they see, and how they perceive our work is critical to our success.

Fourth, build connections BEFORE you need them. Think of your contacts as a savings account. Determine well in advance of your need:

- who might be willing to help you,
- who can stop you and
- what each of them might want that you could supply.

Do you have a principal who believes that science is the answer to all of society's problems? Start by talking with them and supplying new, super, phenomenal information about the role of science in building society. Later, when you need that person's support, they might remember you were caring and conscientious about their interest....and be willing to listen and perhaps help.

Fifth, find partners to share the load and to give your issue broader appeal. Partners are more defined and more interactive than contacts. Connections start with contacts and build toward partnerships. BUT always try to understand why someone partners with you in any cause--try to know what is in it for

them. Few partnerships are simply altruistic...most find a common cause and work for goals that somehow benefit both. That is not a bad thing, it is what is. Be aware of the reality and work within that frame of reference.

Sixth, understand the weak spots of your issue. Even if you cannot fix them (you need tons of money and there is very little available), know what they are and plan ahead how you will address the questions that will come. It is not enough to care about important things - important things are ignored unless they are presented in a compelling manner, with realistic goals, and with committed partners, in terms the resource allocators can understand and with which they identify.

Finally, be flexible...learn that there is always another day. Sometimes all that can be accomplished is a discussion on the public record.

- Outlast your non-partners - quietly, with elegance and accurate information.
- Believe and trust that there is always another day.
- Never win battles and lose wars.
- Retreat with dignity is almost always an option.

Learn from it and try again.

In summary, be careful of the vast difference between selling and marketing. There is room for both, but be sure you know which you are doing. Once more to quote Robert Martin:

"In the business world, trying to convince an individual or group to purchase the product or service that you make or provide is called selling. Marketing, in contrast, is asking a group or individual what product or service that they want to buy, and then developing a product or service that meets the specified demand." (p. 8)

We all have three choices in life:

- (1) put up or shut up,
- (2) go somewhere else, or
- (3) seek to change the situation within the context and by the rules you are given.

No one should be able to do the latter better than librarians. Take heart....and try.

Reference

Martin, Dr. Robert S. (2003) "Beyond Advocacy: Building Community Partnerships in the New Century" WHCLIST Preconference, Houston.